

Gender, Labor, and Economics

Source 1 — Exodus 1:15-22

The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shifra and the other Puah, saying, “When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.” The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?” The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.” And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly. And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them. And Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, “Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”

טו ויאמר מלך מצרים, למילדות העברית, אשר שם האחת שפרה, ושם השנית פועה. טז ויאמר, בילדכן את-העבריות, וראיתן, על-האבנים: אם-בן הוא והמתן אתו, ואם-בת הוא ונתתה. יז ותיראן המילדות, את-האֵלהים, ולא עשו, כאשר דבר אליהן מלך מצרים; ונתחיינן את-הילדים. יח ויקרא מלך-מצרים, למילדות, ויאמר להן, מדוע עשיתן הדבר הזה; ונתחיינן את-הילדים. יט ותאמרן המילדות אל-פרעה, כי לא כנשים המצריות העבריות: כי-חיות הנה, בטרם תבוא אלהן המילדות וילדו. כ וייטב אֵלהים, למילדות; וירב העם ויעצמו, מאד. כא ויהי, כי-ראו המילדות את-האֵלהים; ויעש להם, בתים. כב ויצו פרעה, לכל-עמו לאמר: כל-הבן הילוד, היארה תשליכהו, וכל-הבת, תחיון.

Source 2 — Exodus 35:25-26

And all the skilled women spun with their own hands, and brought what they had spun, in blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and in fine linen. And all the women who excelled in that skill spun the goats' hair.

כה וכל-אשה חכמת-לב, בידיה טוו; וביאו מטוה, את-התכלת ואת-הארגמן, את-תולעת השני, ואת-השש. כו וכל-הנשים--אשר נשא לבן אתנה, בחכמה: טוו, את-העזים

Source 3 — Mishnah Shabbat Perek 2 (translation from Koren Sacks siddur)

For three transgressions women may die in childbirth: for being careless in observing the laws of menstruation, separating challah [dough offering], and lighting the Sabbath light.

על שלש עבירות נשים מתות בשעת לדתן, על שאינן זהירות בנדה ובחלה ובהדלקת הנר:

Source 4 — 1 Samuel 1:9-18/19-20; 1 Samuel 2:18-21

After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose. The priest Eli was sitting on the seat near the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. In her wretchedness, she prayed to the Lord, weeping all the while. And she made this vow: Oh Lord of Hosts, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the Lord for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head.” As she kept praying before the Lord, Eli watched her mouth. Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk. Eli said to her, “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!” And Hannah replied, “Oh no, my lord! I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink, but I have been pouring my heart out to the Lord. Do not take your maidservant for a worthless woman; I have only been speaking all this time out of my great anguish and distress.” “Then go in peace,” said Eli, “and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of Him.” ... Elkanah knew his wife Hannah and the Lord remembered her. Hannah conceived, and at the turn of the year bore a son. She named him Samuel, meaning “I asked the Lord for him”

ט ותקם חנה, אחרי אכלה בשלה ואחרי שתה; ועלי הכהן, ישב על-הכסא, על-מזוזת, היכל יהוה. י והיא, מרת נפש; ותתפלל על-יהוה, ובכה תבכה. יא ותדר נדר ותאמר, יהוה צבאות אם-ראה תראה בעיני אמתך וזכרתי ולא-תשכח את-אמתך, ונתתה לאמתך, זרע אנשים--ונתתיו ליהוה כל-ימי חיי, ומורה לא-יעלה על-ראשו. יב והיה כי הרבתה, להתפלל לפני יהוה; ועלי, שמר את-פיה. יג וחנה, היא מדברת על-לבה--רק שפתייה נעות, וקולה לא ישמע; ויחשבה עלי, לשכרה. יד ויאמר אליה עלי, עד-מתי תשתכרין; הסירי את-יניך, מעליך. טו ותען חנה ותאמר, לא אדני, אשה קשת-רוח אנכי, ויין ושקר לא שתיתי; ואשפה את-נפשי, לפני יהוה. טז אל-תתן, את-אמתך, לפני, בת-בליעל: כי-מרב שיחי וכעסי, דברתי עד-הנה. יז ויען עלי ויאמר, לכי לשלום; ואלהי ישראל, יתן את-שלתך, אשר שאלת, מעמו. יח ותאמר, תמצא שפחתך חן בעיניך... וידע אלקנה את-חנה אשתו, ויזכרה יהוה. כ והיה לתקופות הימים, ותהר חנה ותלד בן; ותקרא את-שמו שמואל, כי מיהוה שאלתיו.

Samuel was engaged in the service of the Lord as an attendant, girded with a linen ephod. **His mother would also make a little robe for him and bring it up to him every year, when she made the pilgrimage with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice.** Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, “May the Lord grant you offspring by the woman in place of the loan she made to the Lord.” Then they would return home. For the Lord took note of Hannah; she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. Young Samuel meanwhile grew up in the service of the Lord.

יח ושמואל, משרת את-פני יהוה: נער, חגור אפוד בד. יט ומעיל קטן תעשה-לו אמו, והעלתה לו מימים ימימה-- בעלותה, את-אישה, לזבח, את-זבח הימים. כ וברך עלי את-אלקנה ואת-אשתו, ואמר ישם יהוה לך זרע מן-האשה הזאת, תחת השאלה, אשר שאל ליהוה; והלכו, למקומו. כא כי-פקד יהוה את-חנה, ותהר ותלד שלשה-בנים ושתי בנות; ויגדל הנער שמואל, עם-יהוה.

Source 5 — On the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire (March 25, 1911)

From, "On a Solemn Anniversary, Remembering the Importance of Unions" by Howie Levine (rac.org), 3/25/2014

Today, on the 103rd anniversary of the fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City, we recall how in **18 minutes**, a fire took the lives of 146 Jewish and Italian immigrants. This infamous event reminds us that as Jews, "it is our pride and our glory that we are kind to those who work for us" and must support the strong institutions that protect the most vulnerable workers (*Sefer HaChinuch*).

Ignited by a stray cigarette or a spark from a machine, it's not hard to see how the fire quickly took the lives of 146 workers - the vast majority women, some as young as 14. The factory was packed densely with workers, highly flammable scraps piled six feet high and the emergency staircase was locked to prevent unauthorized breaks. Firefighters arrived to discover their ladders were too short to reach the factory on the ninth floor and watched as workers jumped to their death, instead of falling victim to the flames.

A coincidental witness to the fire was **Francis Perkins**, then the executive secretary of the National Consumers League and later U.S. Secretary of Labor under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In the aftermath of the fire, Perkins, along with - **largely Jewish** - unions including the National Women's Trade Union League and International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, began pushing for much stricter safety regulations. Soon after, the New York state legislature created the **Factory Investigating Commission** to research and recommend legislative means to prevent future tragedies like the fire. Eventually, the commission pushed through a staggering **36 bills** broadening regulation of child labor, building codes and minimum wage, and granting broader enforcement powers to the New York Department of Labor. Many of these bills were models for New Deal legislation that Perkins later helped implement. Perkins herself, **described** the fire as "the day the New Deal began."